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Citation for published version:

Gentz, J 2009, The Religious Situation in East Asia. in H Joas & K Wiegandt (eds), *Secularization and the World Religions*. Liverpool University Press, Liverpool, pp. 241-277.

<http://www.liverpooluniversitypress.co.uk/index.php?option=com_wrapper&view=wrapper&Itemid=11&AS1=Secularization+and+the+World+Religions>

Link:

[Link to publication record in Edinburgh Research Explorer](#)

Document Version:

Peer reviewed version

Published In:

Secularization and the World Religions

Publisher Rights Statement:

©Gentz, J. (2009). The Religious Situation in East Asia. In H. Joas, & K. Wiegandt (Eds.), *Secularization and the World Religions*. (pp. 241-277). Liverpool: Liverpool University Press.

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The Religious Situation in East Asia

Joachim Gentz

To write about the religious situation in East Asia within the context of a book on ‘secularization and the world religions’ presupposes that the reader understands a number of points. I would like to begin by reflecting briefly on these.

East Asia is taken here to mean China, Japan and Korea. China will be a key focus of attention because it represents the largest and most influential cultural area in East Asia. The term ‘religious’ covers both major global religious traditions and specifically national and local religious forms that dominate the religious situation of individual regions. Alongside older religious traditions such as Daoism, Confucianism and Shintoism, this includes the new religious movements.

The opposite of *religiosus* is *saecularis*. Secularization presupposes an original unity and subsequent separation of religious and non-religious spheres. Otherwise, there is no room for this movement from one to the other that constitutes the meaning of the term. The concept of secularization highlights the relationship between modern European history and the Christian tradition.¹ The separation of church and state and the development of a plurality of perspectives and worldviews, which ended the state’s monopoly on orthodoxy, and the emergence of a civil society, are key components of secularization within the process of European modernization. In countries in which religion and the state have for centuries had a very different kind of relationship, it is not meaningful to speak of a process of secularization. For example, rather than a specific feature of modernity, the nationalization of the property of religious institutions, characteristic of secularization in Europe in its original sense within the context of ecclesiastical law,² has been a key element of national religious politics in

¹ See Hans-Wolfgang Strätz, ‘Säkularisierung’, in Otto Brunner, Werner Conze and Reinhart Koselleck (eds.), *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe – Historisches Lexikon zur politisch sozialen Sprache*, vol. 5, Stuttgart, 2004, p. 827.

² See Strätz, ‘Säkularisierung’, and Giacomo Marramao’s article ‘Säkularisierung’ in

East Asia for more than a thousand years. The coexistence of a number of state-supported religions, moreover, makes both the separation between religions and the state and a plurality of worldviews indigenous elements of East Asian tradition. This does not mean that the state itself operated in secular fashion or that plurality as a concept was ever subject to reflection in the way characteristic of modernity in both Europe and Asia.³ The fact that, in line with the internationally established European model, the state in East Asia is justified in secular terms in the twenty-first century changes almost nothing about its relationship to religions,⁴ and the fact that the topic of plurality is contemplated in Asia in the European way does not necessarily lead to pluralism and democracy.

A particularly wide variety of new religious movements have developed since the late nineteenth century in Japan,⁵ but also in Korea.⁶ One of a series of new religious formations since the Ming period (1368–1644),⁷ they were transformed in the Republican era (1911–1948),⁸ destroyed by the Communist Party of China in the 1950s, and have once again become a central feature of the religious situation in China since the 1990s. The concept of secularization is as incapable of analysing or explaining this wealth of new religious movements in East Asia as in Europe. It explains the disappearance of religion from political institutions, but it explains neither the continued existence of traditional religious institutions within modernity nor the re-emergence of a variety of religious movements in

Joachim Ritter and Karlfried Gründer (eds.), *Historisches Wörterbuch der Philosophie*, vol. 8, Darmstadt, 1992, pp. 1133–34.

³ See Joachim Gentz, 'Die Drei Lehren (*sanjiao*) Chinas in Konflikt und Harmonie. Figuren und Strategien einer Debatte', in Edith Franke and Michael Pye (eds.), *Religionen Nebeneinander: Modelle religiöser Vielfalt in Ost- und Südostasien*, Münster, 2006, pp. 17–40.

⁴ See the discussion of this paradigm of continuity in Vincent Goossaert, 'State and Religion in Modern China: Religious Policies and Scholarly Paradigms', <http://www.mh.sinica.edu.tw/eng/download/abstract/abstract3-4-1.pdf> (1 July 2005), pp. 11–13.

⁵ An overview of the extensive research literature is provided by Peter Bernard Clarke, *Bibliography of Japanese New Religions: with Annotations and an Introduction to Japanese New Religions at Home and Abroad*, Richmond, Surrey, 1999. On Western scholarship, see also H. Byron Earhart, *The New Religions of Japan: A Bibliography of Western-Language Materials*, Tokyo, 1970; and Johannes Laube, *Neureligionen: Stand ihrer Erforschung in Japan, ein Handbuch*, Wiesbaden, 1995, for Japanese materials.

⁶ See Ro Kil-myung, 'New Religions and Social Change in Modern Korean History', *The Review of Korean Studies*, 5.1 (2002), pp. 31–62.

⁷ See Barend J. ter Haar, *The White Lotus Teachings in Chinese Religious History*, Leiden, Brill, 1992; Hubert Seiwert and Ma Xisha, *Popular Religious Movements and Heterodox Sects in Chinese History*, Leiden, 2003.

⁸ See Zhong Guofa, 'A Survey of Newly Emerged Religious Sects in the Republican Era', *China Study Journal*, 13.3 (1998), pp. 22–32.

modern contexts. Hence, the term 'secularization' hinders the development of theoretical approaches to explaining modern religion capable of accounting for religion as an entirely normal feature of modernity.

It is evident empirically that the influence of religion on modern societies has in fact declined markedly worldwide. At present, no one expects religious considerations to exercise a decisive influence on technological or political developments in modernity. Even in the sphere of private morality, religion no longer plays the leading role. Yet this form of empirically verifiable secularization is just one of the possible responses of religion to modernity. Religion has developed in other ways that point in a very different direction. Religion not only plays an important role within modernity as a factor in modernization; modernity has also given rise to new forms of religion, which have led to a typically modern blossoming of the religious landscape on an entirely unexpected scale. Thus, modernity has brought about the withering of certain types of religion or religious organization and commitment, but it has generated new ones which have, in their own way, displayed tremendous social dynamism. Thomas Luckmann for example states, 'what are usually taken as symptoms of the decline of traditional Christianity may be symptoms of a more revolutionary change: the replacement of the institutional specialisation of religion by a new social form of religion'.⁹ It is hard to define these new forms of religion, typical in East Asia even before the modern period, with a terminology thoroughly marked by the European division into religious and secular.

If we define the decline of traditional religion as does Luckmann and, as sociologist Michael Ebertz puts it, work on the assumption of a 'dispersion of the religious',¹⁰ then, to remain with the material metaphor of dispersion, which describes the thin spread of a material, the decline of religion would not mean a loss of substance. This decline would merely involve a change in the material of religion from a compact, institutionally organized form to one identifiable as 'traces' in many places, a form traditionally widespread in East Asia. On this view, rather than being destroyed, religion seems dispersed within the everyday world by the disintegration of religious institutions. The idea here is that, rather than simply ceasing to exist, religious traditions are broken up into countless splinters, in which form they continue to have an effect – one that often goes virtually unacknowledged. Religious scholars have attempted to capture this new field of the formation of the religious, associated with modernity in the case of Europe, through a number of new concepts such as 'civil religion', the 'consecration of the

⁹ See Thomas Luckmann, *The Invisible Religion: The Problem of Religion in Modern Society*, London, Macmillan, 1967, pp. 90–91.

¹⁰ See Michael Ebertz, 'Die Dispersion des Religiösen', in Hermann Kochanek (ed.), *Ich habe meine eigene Religion*, Zürich, 1999, pp. 210ff., cited in Nüchtern, *ibid.*

profane' or 'sacred secularity',¹¹ but so far none of these concepts has really taken hold, presumably because they speak to a field of discursive tension still marked entirely by a Christian understanding of religion. As Michael Nüchtern states, two facts above all make the identification and definition of the religious difficult at present: the appearance of quotations from and symbols of classical religion in an obviously profane (i.e. non-sacred) context, and the taking over of the functions of classical religion by profane spheres of life.¹² This blending of the religious and secular in a context in which, to some extent, the religious becomes secular and the secular religious, complicates the application of a term like 'secularization', within this second horizon of dispersed religiosity, to the point of inapplicability. Here, the inflation of multicultural religious symbols, meaningful only to ever smaller sub-groups, helps bring about a situation in which a phenomenon such as individual religiosity is increasingly defined by the obligation either to recognize all symbols as of equal value or to opt for one tradition through a profession of faith, rejecting all others. In East Asia, this polarization of secularity and fundamentalism has not developed only in the modern period; as differing religious traditions have come to terms with one another, it constitutes a centuries-old pattern with its own discursive tropes and strategies.¹³

East Asian religions have often been studied and analysed through the lens of the secularization paradigm.¹⁴ However, as a result of the focus on a secularization aggressively imposed from above by the state and its consequences, forms of secularization not driven by the state (such as the spontaneous and autonomous transformation of temples into schools at the local level) in East Asia have been little studied and we know little about them. Even the signs and fragments indicative of a new postmodern form of dispersed religiosity have so far been investigated only in the context of party political propaganda (see below), but not yet in the context of everyday life in East Asian cultures, particularly in comparison with traditional forms of dispersed religiosity. In what follows, in order to present the religious situation in East Asia in rather more detail, we shall be looking individually at the three major national entities of China, Japan and Korea, before coming to a comparative conclusion with respect to the issue of secularization in East Asia.

¹¹ On 'civil religion', see the introduction to the dissertation by Thomas Hase, *Zivilreligion: religionswissenschaftliche Überlegungen zu einem theoretischen Konzept am Beispiel der USA*, Würzburg, 2001; and Janez Perèic, *Religion und Gemeinwesen: zum Begriff der Zivilreligion*, Münster, 2004. On the latter two concepts, see Nüchtern, op. cit., pp. 24ff.

¹² See Nüchtern, op. cit., p. 22.

¹³ See Gentz, 'Die Drei Lehren (*sanjiao*) Chinas'.

¹⁴ See Goossaert, 'State and Religion in Modern China', pp. 8–11.

China

The process of European modernization has developed in the form of an *histoire croisée*,¹⁵ that is, a global process characterized by its mutual entanglements and the crossing of national boundaries. This has affected China and its religious landscape as it has all other modern nations. In the wake of modernization, the Chinese empire, which was based on an agrarian economy, a monarchical regime and the ideology of Confucianism, was transformed into a modern nation state with an industrial economy and republican constitution anchored in communist ideology. As such, China now plays an increasingly important role in the global economy and in the political sphere. The People's Republic of China is a centrally governed state with a current population of more than 1.3 billion people. About a third of them live in cities, some of whose populations are several times that of entire European countries (cities such as Beijing, Shanghai or Chongqing for example have three times as many inhabitants as Sweden or Switzerland). In contemporary China there are five religions recognized by the state: Daoism, Buddhism, Islam, Catholicism and Protestantism, represented by the seven affiliated religious associations;¹⁶ many local forms of Chinese popular religion; the religions of the national minorities and finally a new, highly dynamic field of new religious movements that has undergone explosive development in China since the late 1980s and early 1990s. This tense relationship between established, officially recognized religions, popular religious traditions, minority religions and new, frequently syncretic and millenarian religious movements has characterized China for many hundreds of years.

In China's case, the assessment of the relationship between modernization and secularization depends crucially on whether we classify Confucianism as a religion or as agnosticism. The debate on whether Confucianism is a religion or not, which began with the rites controversy in the late seventeenth century and has raged for hundreds of years, remains unresolved and, because it has significant consequences for the evaluation of Chinese cultural history, continues to be hotly contested by the representatives of various ideologies. That the debaters have such different things to say has to do with the fact that Confucianism in China confronts us with something which, in its specific mixture of religious practice, religious criticism and religious politics, is not compatible with any kind of Western ideology, whose religiosity was always

¹⁵ On this concept, see Michael Werner and Bénédicte Zimmermann, 'Vergleich, Transfer, Verflechtung. Der Ansatz der *Histoire croisée* und die Herausforderung des Transnationalen', *Geschichte und Gesellschaft*, 28 (2002), pp. 607–36.

¹⁶ See Karl-Fritz Daiber, 'Les associations des cinq religions officiellement reconnues en République populaire de Chine', *Social Compass*, 51.2 (2004), pp. 255–71.

defined via the orthodoxy of institutionalized religion. Hence, a term like 'secularization' cannot be applied here with any analytical success. The debate on orthodox (*zheng*: correct) and heretical (*xie*: crooked) teachings carried on in China by Confucian officials for more than 2000 years revolves not around the European concern to establish what is true religion or religiosity, but essentially around the issue of what constitutes correct state doctrine. Religions play a marginal role here. They are of interest in as much as they may create something like a broad moral foundation among the people resulting in social and political stability. Otherwise, they are considered potentially dangerous because, as functions of the social structure, they may disturb order within the empire, as numerous incidents in Chinese history verify.¹⁷ Consonant with this, the Chinese state's traditional approach to religions has been characterized by policies which merely prescribe formal structures rather than content, which control the symbolic level of religious representation rather than the faith of the religious and which espouse non-intervention as long as the required ritual forms are observed.¹⁸ It is clearly apparent in imperial edicts on religions that these were judged and disciplined not in accordance with their content but in response to their political impact.¹⁹ This reflects the Confucian attitude towards religion as something about which nothing can be said, which one ought to respect but from which one should keep one's distance.²⁰ The regulations thus argue at a merely formal level with reference to notions of social and political order. Within the religious landscape of China, this combination of state indifference to theological content on the one hand and severe restrictions on politically engaged religion on the other led to a structure made up of a number of small, powerless religious groups that mirrored and reproduced the imperial model of order in their social organization, religious notions and practices.²¹ State

¹⁷ See David Ownby, 'Imperial Fantasies: The Chinese Communists and Peasant Rebellions', *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 43.1 (2001), pp. 65–91.

¹⁸ See James Watson, 'Standardizing the Gods: The Promotion of T'ien Hou ("Empress of Heaven") Along the South China Coast, 960–1960', in David Johnson, Andrew J. Nathan and Evelyn S. Rawski (eds.), *Popular Culture in Late Imperial China*, Berkeley, 1985 (repr. Taipei, 1987), pp. 292–324, here p. 323.

¹⁹ See Yang Ch'ing-k'un, *Religion in Chinese Society*, Berkeley, 1961, 1967 (repr. Taipei, 1991, 1994), edict from 1724, p. 194; Seiwert and Ma, *Popular Religious Movements*, pp. 99–101, 140, 163.

²⁰ See Confucius' oft-cited statements on the subject in the *Analects of Confucius* (*Lunyu*) 5.12, 6.22, 7.20, 11.11.

²¹ See Barend J. ter Haar, 'Local Society and the Organization of Cults in Early Modern China: A Preliminary Study', *Studies in Central & East Asian Religions*, 8 (1995), pp. 1–43.

criticism of religions and steps taken against religions related not to religious concepts, but to the violation of prescribed measures. State prohibitions were short-lived, religious organizations and institutions were destroyed, refashioned and refounded, but traditional policies on religion featured no strict control of the faith of particular religions; the doctrinal boundaries between individual religions were too nebulous.²²

This attitude changed as a result of the encounter with the West. Now that the concept and the term 'religion' had appeared in China for the first time, Chinese intellectuals began to reflect on the concept towards the end of the nineteenth century. The new constitution of 1912 formulated the concept of religious freedom (*zongjiao ziyou*) on the Western model for the first time. The adoption of the Western concept of religion, however, required the adoption of the Western distinction between true religion and superstition.²³ As a result, the first two decades of the twentieth century saw the wholesale persecution and destruction of all traditional religious institutions that did not fit the definitional model of Western religion and were therefore branded backward superstition.²⁴ Because traditional religion also mirrored and reproduced dynastic hierarchies of order, the destruction of the old imperial political legacy of feudalism and the destruction of feudal superstition were often mentioned in one breath. Secularization was deployed as an instrument of the restructuring of religiously based, traditional power relations; it did not occur as a process of the gradual decline of religious faith.²⁵ In order to comply with the new conception of religion and protect themselves from persecution, religious traditions adopted the new prevailing political symbolism and rhetoric.²⁶ From 1912 on, Buddhism, Daoism, Islam and Christianity developed as overarching national religious institutions on the model of Western churches, separate from the institutions of popular religion, which were now viewed as superstition. Daoism, because it was traditionally associated with communities of local cults whose practices were

²² On these issues of content and form, see Joachim Gentz, 'Envisioning Conflicts: Aesthetic Representations in Negotiations between State and Religion in China', unpublished talk given on 29 September 2005 at the University of Leiden. This text will appear as a chapter in a forthcoming book.

²³ See Goossaert, 'State and Religion in Modern China', pp. 2–5.

²⁴ See Vincent Goossaert, 'The Beginning of the End for Chinese Religion?', *The Journal of Asian Studies*, 65.2 (2006), pp. 307–35.

²⁵ See Prasenjit Duara, 'Knowledge and Power in the Discourse of Modernity: The Campaigns against Popular Religion in Early Twentieth-Century China', *The Journal of Asian Studies* 50.1 (1991), pp. 67–83, here pp. 75ff.

²⁶ See Poon Shuk Wah, 'Refashioning Festivals in Republican Guangzhou', *Modern China*, 30.2 (2004), pp. 199–227, here p. 222.

considered superstitious, was often compelled to defend its status as religion. With its 'atheistic' philosophy extending over much of Asia, it was much easier for Buddhism to portray itself as an international religion compatible with science and modernity, with a global orientation and opposed to superstitious notions and practices. With the modernization of China, Chinese Buddhism, which had formerly been in decline, received fresh impetus and underwent a revival driven primarily by the laity. Rather than the secularization of Buddhism, modernization led to an international revival.²⁷ This did not apply to Daoism; on account of its local manifestations and cleavage into traditions, it was less easy to slot into the programme of modernization in a standardized form. Moreover, it lacked a laity actively pursuing its revival.²⁸

Because religion had to organize itself into national religious institutions in the 1910s in order to gain legitimacy, religious institutions developed an officially sanctioned, internal institutional hierarchy for the first time.²⁹ As a consequence of this transformation and redefinition of Buddhism and Daoism, Daoist and Buddhist communities that did not fit the modern concept of religion and which were linked with local cults, along with their associated temples, could be more easily destroyed: they were impossible to integrate into the newly formed umbrella organizations and thus no longer had any basis for legitimacy as religion. Lacking the new attributes of religion such as their own church-like institutions, a hierarchically organized priesthood, holy scriptures, etc. (and lacking their own military force),³⁰ the local religions had no chance to establish themselves in the modern religious sphere and were largely eliminated through several waves of anti-religious movements.³¹ These movements peaked in 1922 through the efforts of the 'Great Federation of Anti-Religionists', founded early the same year, when it was announced that the 'World Student Christian Federation' would meet in Beijing in April. The proclamations of the Great Federation cast scorn on the 'poison' of religion and were initially aimed at Christians. Though it was Christians that constituted the movement's primary target from 1922 to 1927, on a theoretical level it came to the more general conclusion that religion is a product of primitive peoples, that it is based on

²⁷ See Hubert Seiwert, 'Religious Response to Modernization in Taiwan: The Case of I-Kuan-Tao', *Journal of the HK Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society, Royal Asiatic Society of GB and Ireland, HK Branch*, 21 (1981), pp. 43–70.

²⁸ Vincent Goossaert, 'The Quanzhen Clergy 1700–1950', in John Lagerwey (ed.), *Religion and Chinese Society II: Taoism and Local Religion in Modern China*, Paris and Hong Kong, 2004, pp. 699–771.

²⁹ See Daiber, 'Les associations des cinq religions officiellement reconnues'.

³⁰ See Ownby, 'Imperial Fantasies'.

³¹ See Duara, 'Knowledge and Power', p. 79–80.

superstition, is dogmatically intolerant and stands in the way of human progress. It was thought to hinder individual development and social improvements and was seen as hypocritical. On this view, the origins of morality lie in human nature and are not dependent on religion. It was through the arts and sciences that the people's lot would be improved.³² Meanwhile, following the 'European barbarism' of the First World War, representatives of the religions took up arguments found in European cultural criticism, contrasting the materialistic culture of the West with the superior spiritual culture of Asia. China thus negotiated a European contradiction existing between, on the one hand, the often fundamentalist missionary movements with their critique of a modern society considered to be 'materialistic, atheistic and inhumane', and the modernizers with their 'scientific' critique of religion on the other. The theological critique of materialistic culture thus became one of the bases of the spiritual model of Asian culture, while the scientific critique of religion formed one of the foundations of the critique of 'superstitious' tradition.³³ Between 1913 and 1929, a whole series of new religious laws were enacted, formalizing certain elements of the religious practice of the Qing dynasty. These no longer merely provided general guidelines, but precise lists detailing the specific features of correct religions, lists which formed the basis for determining whether local religions should be destroyed or preserved.³⁴ Religious traditions that lacked these features had to redefine themselves in secular terms as tradition, custom, folklore, self-cultivation or Qigong in order to survive.³⁵

But alongside these new religious laws, it was three factors above all that destroyed the social bases of many traditional forms of religion:

1. Festivals and rites, which were bound up with the agricultural cycle, lost significance and decreased in number as a consequence of *industrialization*.
2. The *urbanization* that accompanied industrialization shattered the social and spatial realities characteristic of the villages. Here, community and

³² See Wing-tsit Chan, 'The Historic Chinese Contribution to Religious Pluralism and World Community', p. 193.

³³ See Robert N. Bellah, 'Epilogue: Religion and Progress in Asia', in: idem (ed.), *Religion and Progress in Modern Asia*, New York, 1965, pp. 168–229, here p. 205.

³⁴ Vincent Goossaert, 'Le destin de la religion chinoise au 20^{ème} siècle', *Social Compass*, 50.4 (2003), pp. 429–40, here p. 435. See also Goossaert, 'State and Religion in Modern China', referring to Rebecca Allyn Nedostup, 'Religion, Superstition, and Governing Society in Nationalist China', PhD thesis, Columbia University, 2001, pp. 196–211.

³⁵ Poon Shuk Wah shows this in detail with reference to two religious festivals in his 'Refashioning Festivals in Republican Guangzhou'.

religious community were as good as identical, their unity based on the village temple. Social communities saw themselves as part of the locality and its resident forces and ancestral graves. New social relations developed in the city, and these were no longer identical with the neighbourhood community. Traditional religious life, which was a part of the community, thus lost its social and spatial basis.

3. *Cultural contact with foreign countries* led to Westernization. From the perspective of modern Western science, traditional Chinese religion was superstition. Traditional Chinese culture now no longer represented the sole aesthetic arsenal of the Chinese lifestyle, but was joined by Western ways of life and values. On this basis, people also turned against traditional religion, which was suddenly located within an aesthetic cultural context no longer self-evident to young city dwellers. In these times of rapid change, traditional rituals appeared bereft of meaning to the youth of the cities; ties to the ancestors no longer seemed binding. Rather, on the Western model, based on Western urban values, smaller families developed, as did a more individual worldview in which the social forms of traditional religion no longer had any place.

After the Chinese Communists seized power in 1949, religion was viewed in true Marxist style as a reflection of unresolved class contradictions; it would disappear when these were resolved. It therefore seemed absurd to fight against religion, and people were granted the freedom to follow one; only the five officially permitted religions were and are considered to be religions. A statement made by Mao Zedong shows that he considered Chinese Marxism the religion of the people,³⁶ and visual propaganda produced by the Communist Party of China shows with particular clarity that the party drew very heavily on the traditional popular pictorial arsenal of Chinese religion to promote communism. This developed into nothing less than an iconographic orthodoxy during the Cultural Revolution,³⁷ one which lays bare how traditional religious functions such as the worship of idols, public rituals, sacrifices and martyrdom, redemption, a

³⁶ Donald E. MacInnis, *Religion im heutigen China: Politik und Praxis* (orig. *Religion in China Today: Policy and Practice*, Maryknoll, NY, Orbis, 1989), German translation edited by Roman Malek, Nettetal, Steyler, 1993, p. 26.

³⁷ See John Gittings, 'Excess and Enthusiasm', in Harriet Evans and Stephanie Donald (eds.), *Picturing Power in the People's Republic of China: Posters of the Cultural Revolution*, Lanham, 1999, pp. 27–46, here pp. 30–31; Stefan R. Landsberger, 'Role Modelling in Mainland China during the "Four Modernizations" Era: The Visual Dimension', in Huang Chun-Chieh and Erik Zürcher (eds.), *Norms and the State in China*, Leiden, 1993, pp. 359–76, here pp. 369, 376.

cosmic world order, morality, exorcism, final judgement and true knowledge were transmitted through the medium of visual propaganda.³⁸

As a consequence of Deng Xiaoping's Open Door policy, launched in 1979, Document No. 19 was circulated by the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China in 1982. Here, for the first time, it was accepted that religion could survive and grow under socialism. The right to propagate atheism was removed from the constitution the same year, replaced by a prohibition on forcing anyone to believe or not to believe in something.³⁹ A few years later, the subject of religious studies was reintroduced in the major universities of China. The key concern of research on religion was no longer with demonstrating a materialist and atheist tradition in China, as had been the case with research on atheism decades earlier, but with new questions relating to the possible function of religion in the development of a socialist society in China and religious policies reoriented in accordance with this. On this view, by means of its ethics, religion should help to create good socialist citizens and to produce social stability and unity. Churches and temples were reopened, and religious practice was widely tolerated again.⁴⁰ This resonated so profoundly that commentators spoke of a rampant religious fever. At the same time, there was a mushrooming of unofficial popular religious traditions and unregistered religious institutions across the country, such that the Chinese government felt obliged to take serious measures to restrict illegal religions and cults. To avoid contradicting its own new religious policies, it pursued a twin

³⁸ See Stephan Feuchtwang, *The Imperial Metaphor: Popular Religion in China*, London, Curzon, 2001, ch. 8; Barend J. ter Haar, 'China's Inner Demons: The Political Impact of the Demonological Paradigm', *China Information*, 11.2–3 (1996), pp. 54–88, here pp. 60, 79–84; Joseph M. Kitagawa, 'One of the Many Faces of China: Maoism as a Quasi-Religion', *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies*, 1.2–3 (1974), pp. 125–41; Geremie Barmé, *Shades of Mao: The Posthumous Cult of the Great Leader*, New York, 1996; Joachim Gentz, 'The One Discourse that Pervades All: Concurrent Constructions of an Ideal Order in the Fight Between the CCP and the Falun Gong', unpublished talk given in Heidelberg on 27 August 2004, to appear as a chapter in a forthcoming book. On the religiosity of the modern-day Communist Party in China, see also Anthony C. Yu, *State and Religion in China: Historical and Textual Perspectives*, Chicago, 2005, p. 145.

³⁹ See Merle Goldman, 'Religion in Post-Mao China', *The Annals of the American Academy* (1986), pp. 146–56, here p. 150.

⁴⁰ See Monika Gänßbauer, *Parteistaat und Protestantische Kirche. Religionspolitik im nachmaoistischen China*, Frankfurt, 2004, esp. 'Religionsverständnis im nachmaoistischen China' (pp. 213–45). On the case of Daoism, see Lai Chi-Tim, 'Daoism in China Today, 1980–2002', *The China Quarterly*, 174 (2003), pp. 413–27; on the case of Buddhism, see Yoshiko Ashiwa and David L. Wank, 'The Politics of a Reviving Buddhist Temple: State, Association, and Religion in Southeast China', *The Journal of Asian Studies*, 65.2 (2006), pp. 337–59.

strategy: on the one hand, it granted the registered religions greater recognition, freedom of action and tolerance. On the other, it implemented strict measures against unregistered, illegal religious activities. In 1993, Jiang Zemin became the first high-ranking politician to speak positively about religion in a socialist society. In his famous 'Three Represents', he insisted that religion must be practised within the framework of clearly defined laws. As a result, the religious laws were tightened up markedly in 1994.⁴¹ Shortly after the 'Three Represents' had been reformulated in an even more diluted form in 1999, a major demonstration was held by the Falun Gong movement, in which around 10,000 devotees gathered in front of the seat of government in Beijing; this came as a shock to the Chinese government. This event changed religious politics in one fell swoop, showing that the changes which had occurred in religious policies and legislation in the 1980s must be understood as a form of state tolerance of religion rather than religious freedom in the modern sense. The new religious movements have been dealt with far more harshly since then.

A complex and confusing landscape of new religious movements developed in the PRC in the 1980s and 1990s. Scholars are unable to provide a neat empirical account of these core groups, let alone all their off-shoots, because most of them must remain underground if they wish to survive.

These groupings can in principle be differentiated into those which pick up the thread of indigenous Buddhist, Daoist or Qigong traditions and those based chiefly on Christian elements. Christian and Chinese elements are however almost always combined in varying proportions, and it is possible to discern numerous elements of Western esotericism in many of these groups, from psychological elements through ufological concepts to European notions of Eastern spirituality.⁴² One of the key motives for joining such groups is the belief in their healing powers. This applies to the Qigong movement and local cults, to the Christian congregations, most of which are Pentecostalist in character, and to Falun Gong.⁴³

⁴¹ See Gänßbauer, *Parteistaat und Protestantische Kirche*, pp. 257–66. See also Tony Lambert, 'The Present Religious Policy of the Chinese Communist Party', *Religion, State & Society*, 29.2 (2001), pp. 121–29, here pp. 124–125.

⁴² See Kristin Kupfer, "Geheimgesellschaften" in der VR China: Christlich inspirierte, spirituell-religiöse Gruppierungen seit 1978', *China Analysis*, 8 (2001); Tony Lambert, 'Modern Sects and Cults in China', *China Study Journal*, 13.3 (1998), pp. 6–9. See also the following article by Lu Yunfeng and Luo Weihong. See also Deng Zhaoming, 'Recent Millennial Movements on Mainland China: Three Cases', *Inter-Religion*, 34 (1998), pp. 47–57.

⁴³ See Claudia Währisch-Oblau, 'Healing Prayers and Healing Testimonies in Mainland Chinese Churches: An Attempt at Intercultural Understanding', *China Study Journal*, 14.2 (1999), pp. 5–34; Fan Lizhu, 'The Cult of the Silkworm Mother as a Core of Local Community Religion', *The China Quarterly*, 174 (2003), pp. 359–72, here pp. 365ff.

The Chinese government became aware of these groups and their huge following at an early stage. The problem, however, was that the government was more likely to inspire social unrest than social peace by taking harsh measures against so many millions of practitioners. But if the Bureau of Religious Affairs had officially included these many groups in a new, expanded definition of religion, the number of believers would have grown to such an extent that, in its existing form, the Bureau would no longer have been able to deal with them administratively; it would have required significant expansion, at considerable cost.

Among the larger groups, 15 have so far been officially designated 'heretical teachings' (*xiejiao*) and prohibited. In addition, there are at least five so-called harmful groups, all of whose origins lie in the field of Qigong. At least 30 such groups, which were founded after 1978 and were active for a number of years, are known to have existed. 18 of these groups are still in existence. The years between 1983 and 1993 were the golden age of the foundation of new religious movements. The tensions of religious politics, along with the typical structure of new religious movements, with their loose institutional organization and fixation on a charismatic leader, cause these groupings to splinter and be renamed on a regular basis. This makes it difficult to determine precisely the origins and development of the individual movements. The spread of these groups ranges from individual provinces to the national and international levels. It is extremely difficult to determine the number of adherents because most of them are unregistered and make no official profession of their faith. According to official estimates, the total number of adherents of new religious movements in the PRC is 1.5 million, while other estimates assume a figure of up to 80 million. This would be around 5.3 per cent of the total population.⁴⁴ The number of members probably lies between a few thousand and a few hundred thousand per group, a small number of larger groups extending into the millions. Falun Gong (FLG), which used to have 70 million followers, is an exception here.

We know the Falun Gong movement because of the meditators, often clothed in yellow garb, or the small groups performing traditional Chinese dances, both of which can be seen in the pedestrian areas of Western city centres, their activities intended to raise awareness of the repression and torture suffered in China by this new Chinese religious movement. It was founded in 1992 as a lay movement by Li Hongzhi (born 7 July 1952 or 13 May 1951) and is representative of a religious dynamic that developed subsequent to the Qigong fever of the 1980s in China. Li, the charismatic leader of this movement, sees FLG as a path of perfection leading to the highest possible levels of physical and spiritual cultivation. This includes a whole series of Qigong exercises as well as a doctrine centred on the three concepts of truthfulness (*zhen*), compassion (*shan*) and

⁴⁴ See Kupfer, "Geheimgesellschaften" in der VR China'.

forbearance (*ren*). These three concepts are considered to be moral principles and at the same time characteristics of the cosmos present in its smallest elements. According to the teachings of the FLG, by refraining from every kind of desire and all forms of individual wilfulness, one's spiritual nature becomes cultivated to such an extent that, first of all, one attains supernatural powers and one's body is transformed; eventually, one's individual cells and molecules consist purely of cosmic energy. The Falun Law Wheel, which according to Falun Gong doctrine is inserted into the abdomen of the practitioner by Li Hongzhi's transcendental Law Body, is helpful here. According to Li, it is a high-energy, intelligent rotating body consisting of matter, which has the same properties as the cosmos and thus represents a cosmos in miniature. It continuously collects energy from the cosmos and, even during sleep, brings about a permanent transformation, automatically converting it into cultivating energy.⁴⁵

According to Li Hongzhi's teachings, the world is morally corrupt, which is due in part to the influence of harmful beings from other worlds, which have brought modern science to this world in order to make people dependent on them and thus subjugate them. Li Hongzhi sees himself as the only one who knows and embodies the cosmic principles and who has therefore attained such a high level of cultivation that only he is capable of saving the world from ruin, of changing it back into a good world.

Li Hongzhi describes his own system as part of the Buddhist school, but underlines that Falun Gong has nothing to do with Buddhism as a religion. He is also very keen to ensure that no religious terminology is used in translations of his works. But the FLG doctrine entails many elements from the religious traditions of Chinese Daoism and Buddhism. It bears all the typical hallmarks of popular lay religious movements since the Ming era (1368–1644): it has its own scriptures, cultivates a sophisticated body discourse concerned with the healing or rejuvenation of the body through moral or technical practice, while the adherents believe in limitless human potential and supernatural abilities and transformation of the body, above all through morality. They also believe in the notion that human beings have been cast out from a blissful original state, the aim being to return to this state. There is also a belief in a living Buddha who embodies the highest truth, and, finally, the associated belief that one may take short cuts to redemption through external help such as the Law Wheel, in other words, beliefs of a kind associated with the tradition of Mahayana Buddhism.⁴⁶ At the same time,

⁴⁵ See Li Hongzhi, *Zhuan Falun* (the complete teachings of Falun Gong), Gloucester, MA, Fairwinds, 2001; idem, *Das Große Vervollkommnungsgesetz des Falun-Buddha-Gebotes*, Bad Pyrmont, 1998.

⁴⁶ See David Ownby, 'A History for Falun Gong: Popular Religion and the Chinese State since the Ming Dynasty', *Nova Religio*, 6.2 (2003), pp. 223–43.

modern concepts are integrated into the doctrinal system to a striking degree. Alongside Buddhist and Daoist content, the teachings express a worldview which, up to and including specific lines of argument, is strongly imbued with pseudo-scientific and ufological elements of new Western religions in the same vein as Erich von Däniken's ideas. The teachings of FLG thus represent a syncretic blend of indigenous traditional religion, modern science, esoteric doctrine and ufology quite typical of twentieth-century new religious movements around the world.

In response to the FLG mass demonstration held by around 10,000 adherents (of around 60 to 70 million FLG practitioners at the time) on 25 April before the seat of government in Beijing, FLG in China was prohibited as a 'heretical cult'⁴⁷ on 22 July 1999. The group is accused of causing unrest and social instability, spreading superstition and heretical ideas and of deceiving the masses – all of them accusations characteristic of Chinese religious politics for centuries, some of them using an identical form of words. As a consequence, a new religious law was enacted in October 1999, featuring more stringent criteria for the prohibition and prosecution of 'heretical cults', whose activities could now be punished as criminal acts for the first time.

Since the mid-1990s, Li has been living in the USA in an unknown location. The FLG movement is defending itself against party propaganda with massive counter-propaganda and lays claim to the party's key spheres of legitimacy such as true knowledge, correct morality and correct leadership, using the same tools of propaganda as the party, mirroring its approach in perfect symmetry.⁴⁸ In contrast to the brutal deployment of physical violence against FLG followers on the part of the Chinese state, such violence has not yet been used by the FLG.

One consequence of this clash is the enactment of far stricter laws on religion since 1999. All the important religious laws of the last six years may be related to the FLG. Apart from the latter, however, they are directed at all new religious movements, Qigong groups, all of which were removed from the official register and therefore lost legitimate status, and the underground Christian churches.⁴⁹ Furthermore, the global discourse on terrorism subsequent to 11 September 2001 serves the Chinese regime as a new, politically correct justification for the persecution of religious groups in China, particularly the Muslim minorities in the province of Xinjiang.⁵⁰

⁴⁷ The traditional Chinese term *xiejiao* refers to illegitimate teachings and is now understood as equivalent to the American term 'heretic cult', which is also used to translate it.

⁴⁸ See Gentz, 'The One Discourse that Pervades All'.

⁴⁹ See Gänßbauer, 'Religion (*zongjiao*) versus üble Kulte (*xiejiao*)', ch. 11.3 in *Parteistaat und Protestantische Kirche*, pp. 257–66.

⁵⁰ See the 115-page report from Human Rights Watch 'Devastating Blows: Religious

Since the early 1950s, the Chinese government has built up an elaborate bureaucratic supervisory structure intended to ensure that religion serves political objectives, and which essentially continues to exist today. The Bureau of Religious Affairs has divisions at every level of the state bureaucracy and is active politically at the provincial, municipal, district and county level. Each of the five officially recognized religions has a 'patriotic association' that regulates the relationship between religion and state and sees to it that state directives are implemented at the local level and that all relevant information from the association arrives at the centre. The structure of these patriotic associations parallels that of the Bureau of Religious Affairs.

Essentially, the Bureau's responsibilities consist in registering, monitoring and regulating membership, places of religious gathering and practice, religious education, selection of clergy, publication of religious material, financing of religious activities, etc. It undertakes annual checks on registration and imposes prohibitions and punishments on 'illegal' organizations and activities. Registration-related work is one of the Bureau's key tasks, representing the Chinese state's most important tool for controlling and monitoring religious organizations, as registration requires religious groups to give up their power to reach autonomous decisions on their clergy, financial affairs, programmes, religious materials, education and more besides; this power passes to the Bureau, which keeps an eye on these areas and is involved in decision-making.⁵¹ Services may be monitored; in a Christian context, for example, certain topics such as the Second Coming, Judgement Day and the biblical creation story may be censored. All baptisms must be reported and applied for in triplicate. One form goes to the Bureau of Religious Affairs, one to the appropriate Patriotic Association and one to the applying parents' place of work. Legal recognition of a baptism depends on the consent of all three entities.⁵²

In 1994, the formerly typical legal regulations, which were of a general and flexible character, were replaced by a large number of detailed regulations governing registration procedures. As the state begins to base its religious policy far more strongly on the law, it is evident that we are dealing here with something like secularization in the legal sense of the consolidation of a system of justice that is secular because it no longer has a purely ideological foundation. Since then, the condemnation of religious practice has increasingly been justified with reference to specific offences rather than counter-revolution and other ideological principles. The law on religion, which has been tightened since 1999, relates to

Repression of Uighurs in Xinjiang', vol. 17, no. 2 (C), April 2005, <http://hrw.org/english/docs/2005/04/11/china10447.htm>.

⁵¹ See Human Rights Watch/Asia, *China: State Control of Religion*, New York, 1997.

⁵² See Gänßbauer, *Parteistaat und Protestantische Kirche*.

all religious groups classified as illegal; alongside followers of FLG, who have faced outright persecution, this applies in particular to the underground Christian churches; organizations such as ChinaAid report encroachment by the state on a weekly basis in the form of persecution, arrests and torture. In this respect, the Internet as a medium of information facilitates an entirely new and in some cases shocking transparency, of a kind unthinkable in the past.

Of key importance here is the state's distinction between the practice of religion and criminal activity, on which the state's understanding of religious freedom rests. Consonant with this, the official line is that no one is prosecuted or punished on account of his or her faith, but only for engaging in illegal activities in the form of criminal offences, which recalls traditional religious policies. According to the new laws, all religious activities which are not officially registered are considered criminal offences. The interpretation of religious activities on the part of the Communist Party generally differs markedly from the self-image projected by the religious communities.⁵³

Alongside the Ministry of Public Security, the Ministry of State Security and other government departments, three organizations have been established specifically to monitor new religious movements:

1. The Central Leading Group on Dealing with FLG and so-called 610 Office, which has overall responsibility for dealing with FLG. The 'Falun Gong Surveillance Team', established on 10 June 1999 and thus generally known by the abbreviated form '610 Office', is the most important response from an administrative point of view to the mass demonstration carried out by the FLG in April 1999. This institution takes its orders directly from the central government; on this basis, it operates autonomously on all political and administrative levels, across all administrative, local and juridical boundaries.⁵⁴
2. The Office for Prevention and Handling of Heretical Teachings, which coordinates the day-to-day operation of state religious policy.
3. The China Anti-Cult Association, concerned largely with propaganda and research.

⁵³ See the in-depth study by David Ownby, 'Imperial Fantasies'.

⁵⁴ The most detailed account yet of this institution is found in the first volume of the inquiry report on the persecution of Falun Gong; see *Diaocha baogao ji 1*, pp. 18–19, 42–53. According to the introduction to the first volume (p. 16), the second volume will deal exclusively with the government institutions, elaborating in more detail on the functioning of the 610 Office. See also the diagram in the version of the *Diaocha baogao* from 15 August 2004 at <http://www.upholdjustice.org/NEWS/ZC-all.pdf>, p. 6 (16 August 2004).

The Minister for Public Security, Zhou Yongkang, described the FLG and other ethnic-religious activities as the two greatest threats to the social stability of China.

To place these organs of surveillance, conceived by the central government, within the context of their pragmatic deployment at the local level, I will refrain from examining here the many dreadful arrests and cases of torture regularly reported by missionary societies and human rights organizations. While this perspective must be taken very seriously, it is nonetheless geared selectively towards the activities of these organs, which tell us little about the relationship between politics and practice in the religious field, which is, in all, far more complex. In what follows, I shall therefore look at the near-daily ritual occurrences that are a key characteristic of the popular religion so strong in southeast China and which illustrate very well the complexity of the relationship between state and religion at the local level. It is hard to fathom these ritual events with the criteria typical of European definitions of religion. Southeast China is home not to hierarchically organized religious institutions, but to a complex network of local temples dedicated to a rich pantheon of local divinities. Rather than a hierarchically organized priesthood, there are local leaders who are endowed with responsibility for organizing local communal rituals on an alternating basis through rotation procedures or divination. Daoist, Buddhist or Confucian ritual specialists are employed, mostly from outside the villages, to carry out specific rituals. Local spirit mediums are often possessed by the divinities of the village temple, perform religious acts and say powerful words during the ritual. But all these acts are too diverse and specific to constitute a particular doctrine or to express specific religious beliefs. They thus fail to tally with the Communist Party's official concept of religion, which is geared towards definitional criteria such as doctrine, literature, organized institution, hierarchical priesthood, rituals which express religious beliefs, etc. – criteria, in other words, which were developed in light of European religious history and which are of little use in describing Chinese popular religion as practised by hundreds of millions of Chinese in southeast China.

According to Kenneth Dean, the popular religion of southern China is better described as a 'syncretistic field'.⁵⁵ Most of the thousands of villages have at least

⁵⁵ Kenneth Dean, *Lord of the Three in One: The Spread of a Cult in Southeast China*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1998. My account also draws on Dean's *Taoist Ritual and Popular Cults of Southeast China*, Princeton, 1993, and his article 'Local Communal Religion in Contemporary South-east China', *China Quarterly*, 174 (2003), pp. 338–58. See also his 'China's Second Government: Regional Ritual Systems of the Putian Plains', in *Shehui, minzu yu wenhua zhanyan guoji yantaohui lunwenji* (Collected Papers from the International Conference on Social, Ethnic and Cultural Transformation), Taipei, 2001, pp. 77–109.

one temple, often more, dedicated to a community divinity. Since the destruction of the Cultural Revolution, many of these temples have been rebuilt over the last 20 years. The life of the temples is highly active and is organized by temple committees. Events are held there several times a week, ranging from processions of gods within the village through processions between villages or to holy sites and a variety of rituals, to performances of traditional opera, puppet theatre and even films. A procession may involve up to 100 villages and last up to a week. In this way, stable local networks are created and continuously strengthened. This extremely dense network of local temples sometimes takes on a large number of local administrative tasks, thus forming a kind of unofficial second level of local government. This restoration of the traditional temple networks in southern China can, therefore, also be seen as the continuation of a particular kind of politics that has increasingly taken hold over a period of 400–500 years, namely the transferral of tasks and duties of the central government to the localities, which are organized institutionally through these temple networks and thus gain some degree of local autonomy. Here, local autonomy does *not* mean the separation of religion from the state, but the downwards distribution of responsibility for local affairs to a local managerial elite, whose institutional basis lies in temples, lineage associations and similar local institutions. These constitute a dense and well-organized religious infrastructure used concurrently for other purposes. But this does not mean that the religious structures are straightforwardly secular; we can merely observe that the boundaries of our analytical concepts are seemingly not drawn so strictly in practice. It is important to how we evaluate these phenomena that the newly emerging temples and rituals are not merely a rigid revival of a lost past. Above all, they are arenas in which the forces and themes of modernity are actively negotiated. It is precisely modern traditions and motifs that are being actively grappled with, integrated and adopted in the context of local culture; what we are seeing here is the absorption and adoption of technological and political innovations within the indigenous cultural symbol system, whether it is portraits of Mao in processions or the exchange of CD-ROMs, featuring the latest ritual innovations, between the temple committees. The three main actors in this field are the clergy of the local temple, national religious associations under the aegis of the state and the Bureau of Religious Affairs. Resources and meanings are constantly being negotiated between these three key actors. Confrontations between them are played out within the institutional framework of the religious laws laid down by the state, laws whose specific interpretation is constantly negotiated by all sides through mutual discursive exchange. The national religious associations play a dual role here: they both supervise and protect the local religious communities and have a mediating and translating function between state and local interests. It is their task to ensure that the local institutions retain the greatest possible

degree of autonomy without infringing the state's religious laws, while asserting their own autonomy as much as possible vis-à-vis both parties.⁵⁶

Hence, these examples at least clearly refute the thesis that modernization brings detraditionalization and secularization in its wake. But despite this revival, religious life in the People's Republic of China is very different from that which pertained before the ravages of the twentieth century, which have markedly diminished the religious sphere as a result of the long period of repression and the economic restrictions that accompanied it. However, in those places where the local economy is reviving, the reconstruction of the old traditions is also proceeding much more rapidly, in Fujian on the southeast coast of China for example, which has close ties with Hong Kong and Taiwan, from which it receives a great deal of financial aid. But religious life was most damaged by the decline of the lineage as the centre of socioeconomic and ritual life. Because the clan associations no longer have estates or central financial administrations, they are no longer able to keep up their clan rituals on a large scale. The temples of the local divinities and associated rites, on the other hand, have been very well preserved and reconstructed since 1979. Some were prohibited, others were frozen in the form of museums, while others managed, by involving old retired party cadres for instance, to grow, thrive and become rich, emerging as significant cultural centres in which community events took place, in much the same way as sometimes occurs in the parish hall in rural Germany. But apart from the waves of anti-religious campaigns, to which smaller local temples have repeatedly fallen victim, regulations have been increasingly bureaucratized since the 1990s, severely curtailing many temple activities. The *Far Eastern Economic Review* (6 June 1996) reported that in the province of Zhejiang between February and June 1996, at least 15,000 unregistered temples, churches and graves were destroyed by the police; the city of Ningbo alone lost 3,000 temples. On 12 December 2000, *Agence France Press* reported the destruction of 1,200 temples in the region of Wenzhou alone, carried out partly with dynamite. A failure to register them properly was claimed to be the reason.

On the whole, however, simply because of their own limited means, the state institutions in this extremely large and diverse country must still leave plenty of gaps in the systems of control and administration. These are then filled by local, autonomous forms of collective organization that create their own order, forms which are often not only tolerated by the state, but on which it in fact depends. This very often entails recourse to pre-modern modalities which express a particular way of life, the regional tradition and particular cultural values, which

⁵⁶ See the detailed case study by Ashiwa and Wank, 'The Politics of a Reviving Buddhist Temple', which provides a very clear account of the individual camps' options for action.

flourish anew on the basis of a mutual understanding between representatives of local religion and the state. This, though, is possible only to the extent that these local forms do not become too powerful and continue to observe the official rituals of regular reports and contact with the political centre. The ritual events in southeast China constitute temporary autonomous zones, in which local communities express themselves and are given form, zones which are constantly in motion and of a kind which can only ever exist through such movement. In the north of China, local cults develop less in the context of a religious infrastructure organized on a large scale than around powerful religious personalities, who then bring about the development of individual religious structures⁵⁷ or as places in which, in a kind of local public sphere, the power of local elites is articulated vis-à-vis or together with the local representatives of state power; these sites link various institutions, all of which benefit from the religious activities in various ways and therefore support them.⁵⁸

It is of relevance to the present topic that these temple activities have certain traits of civil society associations and clearly contradict the thesis that modern religion involves a withdrawal into the private sphere.

According to Goossaert,⁵⁹ it is possible to identify three basic state measures in China relating to religion in the twentieth century, which also shed light on our topic of secularization. First, the state replaced the traditional distinction between orthodoxy and heterodoxy, which related to the imperial, canonically based ethical-cosmological system, with the Western distinction between religion and superstition, which involved entirely new criteria and led to the identification of five officially recognized religions. Second, the state attempted to reform these five religions and to bring their teachings and practices into alignment with state ideology. Third, it incorporated some elements of the religions into its own secular programme. Thus, secularization appears here mainly as a programme of new classifications within a new system of order, within whose categories religious traditions had to reinvent themselves as 'religion', or, if they failed to exhibit the defined characteristics, as 'sciences', 'medicine', 'folklore', 'philosophy', 'ethics' or 'sport'. In this context, then, secularization must also be understood as the redefinition of traditional teachings and practices within a new conceptual system. Here, the place reserved for 'religion' was so greatly diminished that the continuity of religious traditions could be ensured only under a secular banner.

⁵⁷ See Lizhu, 'The Cult of the Silkworm Mother'.

⁵⁸ See Adam Yuet Chau, 'The Politics of Legitimation and the Revival of Popular Religion in Shaanbei, North-Central China', *Modern China*, 31.2 (2005), pp. 236–78.

⁵⁹ Goossaert, 'State and Religion in Modern China', p. 5.

Japan

Japanese religious history is marked by constant state intervention in religious affairs and constant wrangling over authority in religious activities. The role of the state has constantly changed, as Kitagawa has convincingly shown.⁶⁰ In the Japanese context, an inquiry into secularization must focus in particular on the state functionalization of religion to political ends, which dominated Japanese religious politics long before the modern period, beginning in the Meiji era, and which has remained one of its key features.

During the Tokugawa shogunate (1615–1868), religions were kept under strict surveillance, stricter than was ever possible in China. In order to clamp down on the prohibited new Christians, from 1635 all citizens were required to become members of Buddhist temples and have themselves registered in Buddhist temple registers. The Buddhist temples thus became divisions of the state administration, in which births, marriages, adoptions, deaths, changes of residence, occupation and other data were recorded. The temples also functioned as schools, in which reading and writing as well as Confucian ethics were taught. But while every citizen had to become a Buddhist, documents of the period show no evidence at all of an increase in the citizens' interest in Buddhism. Buddhist priests thus became state functionaries and bureaucrats, and Buddhism as a religion developed little during this period. This integration into the state apparatus initially led to a reduction in religious-spiritual activity and thus to secularization. In the Meiji period, from 1868 on, this situation changed through the encounter with the West and the intense Westernization that set in as a result. Shintoism developed, together with the plethora of new religions, as a countermovement to a Buddhism perceived as hollowed out. The Meiji regime, led once again by the emperor after many hundreds of years, transformed this general antipathy towards Buddhism into harsh persecution, which peaked in the 1870s under the slogan 'Eliminate Buddhism' with temple closures, the expulsion of Buddhist priests and monks and the destruction of Buddhist religious objects. Popular discontent and foreign protests led to alleviation of the persecution and ultimately to formal freedom of religion and the separation of church and state. At the same time, an attempt was made to cleanse Shintoism of all Buddhist elements and to transform it into a state religion on the Western model, to which end the Meiji government formulated new criteria, which often had little in common with local Shinto practice.⁶¹

⁶⁰ See Joseph M. Kitagawa, 'Some Reflections on Japanese Religion and its Relationship to the Imperial System', *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies*, 17.2–3 (1990), pp. 129–78.

⁶¹ See Geynor Sekimoni, 'Paper Fowl and Wooden Fish: The Separation of Kami and Buddha Worship in Haguro Shugendō 1869–1875', *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies*, 32.2 (2005), pp. 197–234.

The idea of a state Shintoism was abandoned again in 1872, and a Ministry of Religion was established which held jurisdiction over Buddhism and Shintoism. The personnel of both religions were now urged to spread nationalism and to teach religion and morality with an emphasis on loyalty to the ruler and state.

In 1873 Christianity was permitted again, which immediately led to the establishment of a large number of Christian organizations. In 1882, the state recognized the many newly founded Shinto schools as independent groups in their own right and now distinguished officially between sect-Shinto, which was financially autonomous, and shrine-Shinto, which received support from the state. In 1884, the separation between religion and the state was officially codified. The Administrative Bureau for Religious Affairs was dissolved, and from now on the state-backed shrine-Shintoism was no longer regarded as a religion but as a national cult. It was therefore divested of the authority to carry out funerals, which had become a Shinto prerogative during the period of persecution of Buddhism. In 1889, a new constitution extended freedom of religion to the entire population and banned religious education in public schools. But it allowed shrine-Shintoism broad scope for non-religious activities, making patriotism into a national cult. Veneration of the emperor and other Shinto divinities, all of which were declared national divinities, now became part of the syllabus of public schools and the patriotic duty of citizens of all ages. In this way, traditional religious politics was now carried on in supposedly modern nationalist-secular fashion. From the turn of the century onwards, it is evident that representatives of Japanese Buddhism also responded to the Western understanding of religion by incorporating the conceptual standards of Christian religion into their own self-portrayals, in which experiences of transcendence, for example, now appear as a significant feature of Japanese Buddhism for the first time.⁶² In the years leading up to the Second World War, we can discern a power struggle between the state's efforts to organize and control religions on the Western model, and countervailing religious forces, which also asserted their religiosity on a Western model; as a result, the state organs of surveillance changed constantly. The state tried to use the leaders of individual religious schools to control religion in a general sense. It delegated surveillance to the religious groups, which were forced to merge to form larger entities in 1941 and 1942, enabling the state to monitor them very closely. The 56 Buddhist branches were reduced to 28; Christians, Buddhists and sect-Shintoists were forced to take part in shrine worship; religious leaders who resisted this were browbeaten, punished and locked up; religious groups which resisted were repressed, so that no opposition to speak of could get off the ground. Religions were entirely subject to a totalitarian regime.

⁶² See Isomae Jun'ichi, 'Deconstructing "Japanese Religion". A Historical Survey, *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies*, 32.2 (2005), pp. 235–48, here pp. 238–39.

In 1945, subsequent to Japan's defeat in the Second World War, shrine-Shintoism was abolished as a national cult, the emperor officially revoked his divine status, and freedom of religion was proclaimed under a new constitution that reduced state control of religion. A Department for Religious Affairs was established within the Ministry of Education to monitor this. The original 56 Buddhist branches separated again, which meant that, together with all the splinter groups now approved, a total of 260 Buddhist corporations existed in 1950; this figure was reduced to 170 by the law on religious corporations of 1951. This splintering weakened the Buddhist centres financially and politically.⁶³ Social groups that formed around particular shrines were often identical with so-called neighbourhood associations (*chônaiikai*), which were state-decreed and state-controlled initiatives. A similar intermediate institutional status was enjoyed by the so-called corporations of public interests (*kôeki hôjin*), which enabled the state to monitor civil activities since their codification in Article 34 of the Meiji civil law of 1896. After 1945, the form of state intervention into civil affairs changed, primarily taking the form of very precise bureaucratic regulations. Specific laws were made for the administration of all types of corporation, including religious ones, but all these corporations are subgroups of these state corporations of public interests. These corporations have to report regularly to a ministry and may be investigated and prohibited by it. The corporations, including the religious variety, must hand over lists of their annual activities, assets, membership figures, expenditure, accounts, planned activities, etc., which limits their autonomy. Often, an understanding exists that former administrative employees from state institutions are to be appointed on a preferential basis, so that the groups' membership also tends to list stateward. Not all religious groups, however, have been incorporated into such corporations, or have been incorporated only after many years. When the law on religious corporations came into effect in 1951, the Religious Affairs Section (*Shûmuka*) of the Agency for Cultural Affairs (*Bunkachô*), which was tasked with administration of the law, kept track of unincorporated religious organizations, and their number was published annually in the Yearbook of Religions (*Shûkyô nenkan*) between 1947 and 1960.⁶⁴ In this period, the number of unincorporated groups grew from 13,300 in 1947 to 40,000 in 1960. It is, unfortunately, impossible to determine how many of these groups exist today. At 178,603, the number of religious corporations has been astonishingly stable since 1951, with a maximum deviation of just 3 per cent.

⁶³ See Edward Norbeck, *Religion and Society in Modern Japan: Continuity and Change*, Houston, 1970.

⁶⁴ For an evaluation, see David Reid, 'Statistics on Religious Organisations in Japan 1947–1972 (I)', *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies*, 2.1 (1975), pp. 45–64 and in the eight following issues, up to no. 4.4 (1977).

Buddhism continues to be the strongest religion in Japan. Because it is also regarded as the normative religion on account of its continuity, there are almost no studies on contemporary Buddhism in Japan, despite the fact that around half of all Japanese take part in the practices of traditional Buddhism.⁶⁵ It is hard to keep track of Buddhist organizations. They are organized around so many different activities within civil society that they are often scarcely identifiable as religious groups. Traditional practices are being modernized, and contact is being made with Buddhist organizations abroad; some get involved in politics, while others play an active role in the provision of social welfare, carry out missionary work abroad or attempt to strengthen patriotism. Since the 1880s, a large number of Buddhist teaching associations and lay associations have developed. Many new groups have been founded over the last 120 years, and time and again great efforts have been made to unite these groups with the established Buddhist schools, for the big schools are very closely monitored by the Home Ministry, which requires them to obtain state agreement for all major projects and all changes. Since 1974, however, the Buddhists have established a large number of new organizations outside the sphere of state influence, of which the NGO (non-governmental organization) network founded in 2002 is undoubtedly the most important. It now comprises more than 40 NGOs, of which the largest manages an annual budget of around 6.5 million euros, has around 183 employees and branches in three countries.⁶⁶

As with traditional Buddhist institutions, it is impossible to provide a precise account of the foundation of new Shinto organizations. Up to 1945, Shintoism in Japan was divided into three main organizations, out of which the Shinto Shrines Association (*Jinja Honchô*) developed to unite the Shinto world after the war. So far, no Shinto NGOs have emerged. The preservation of a small unit of around 8,000 Shinto priests under the leadership of the Central Authority of the Shinto Shrines Association clearly takes priority over the dissemination of Shintoism within society through specific projects.

Alongside the established traditional religions, Japan is famous for its many new religions: these were first founded towards the end of the Tokugawa era, from the early to the mid-nineteenth century, during the upheavals that led to the emergence of modern, industrialized Japan. The Tokugawa government, however, prohibited the establishment of new religious groups beyond the 13 Buddhist schools already approved. After the Meiji restoration, these new

⁶⁵ See also the introduction by the two editors of the special issue on contemporary Buddhism in Japan: Stephen G. Covell and Mark Rowe, 'Traditional Buddhism in Contemporary Japan', *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies*, 31.2 (2004), pp. 245–54.

⁶⁶ See the account by Jonathan S. Watts, 'A Brief Overview of Buddhist NGOs in Japan', *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies*, 31.2 (2004), pp. 417–28.

religious movements were permitted to set themselves up as 13 new Shinto schools, triggering a second wave of new religions in the form of Shinto sects in the early to middle Meiji period, in other words between 1870 and 1890. Some of these religions were institutionalizations of nationalist Shinto movements, while others were popular religious groups which had formed above all around mountain hermits. A third wave began in the 1920s, a period of political repression at the hands of a military government. The fourth and largest wave followed the removal of state control of religion after 1945. The last wave of the so-called 'new new religions' runs from the 1970s to the present day. In total, we have evidence of the foundation of around 400 new religions in Japan, a figure that includes only those religions that made some public impact and whose existence has been reported. Approximately twice as many new Christian groups have been founded.

The new religions are generally characterized as follows: 1) Their teachings place emphasis on ceremonies and revealed holy scriptures. 2) The founders are usually charismatic figures promising salvation and often come from unsophisticated, impoverished families. 3) They are mostly syncretic and entail various mixtures of Buddhist, Shinto, Christian and shamanistic elements. 4) In terms of doctrine and ritual, the new religions are very simple in form. Rarely based on innovative ideas, they draw on the religious-historical arsenal characteristic of their immediate context with varying emphases. They are very easy to understand and thus spread quickly among the population at large. 5) Adherents are promised worldly success; material gain is highly valued and is a key component of preaching. 6) Physical wellbeing and healing thus play a major role. 7) Most new religions are strongly eschatological in character and point to a happy life in the near future. 8) Enthusiasm and individualism mark out the new religions from their traditional counterparts. 9) Many new religions reject any hierarchy that distinguishes between lay people and specialists; most members are involved in the performance of holy rites. 10) While maintaining a clear distance from the old religions, the new religions are nonetheless emphatically Japanese and make reference to old Japanese traditions. 11) The new religions include many popular religious elements, magical practices, shamanistic rites and ancestor worship. 12) At the same time, modern elements are also incorporated; women, for example, play an important role and enjoy a new, equal status.⁶⁷

⁶⁷ See the chapter 'Characteristics' in Clark B. Offner and Henry van Straelen, *Modern Japanese Religions*, Leiden, 1963, pp. 28–38, which provides a detailed account of the specific characteristics with reference to numerous examples. Ichiro Hori summarizes this chapter through a list of eleven points; see *Folk Religion in Japan*, Chicago, 1968, paperback Chicago, 1974, p. 224. See also the eight characteristics identified by Harry Thomsen in *The New Religions of Japan*, Rutland, VT and Tokyo, 1963, 1969, pp. 20–29.

From 1921 to 1933, around twice as many new religions were founded as in the previous 20 years. There was a pronounced peak in 1940, a decline during the war, and another surge after it. After the war, some of the new religions became real mass organizations. While some of the groups, which achieved memberships of more than one million after 1945, such as the Sôka Gakkai, the Reiyû kai Kyôdan or the Risshô Kôseikai, had already been founded before the war, their growth had been held in check by state restrictions until 1945; they subsequently underwent truly explosive expansion. From 1965 on, we can again discern a clear slackening in the new religions' developmental dynamism. At the same time, the post-1945 period saw the substantial development of Christian groups. Alongside the Christian churches, the Christian Yearbook for 2004 lists a wide range of charitable, evangelical and other groups. Of these, we can identify around 1,000 different groups that still exist. The developmental dynamic of Christian groups differs from that of the new religions. Up to 1900, Christianity showed strong development, but in the period between 1900 and 1945 it was regulated and restricted by the military government; after 1945 it resumed its vigorous growth. The growth rates of Christian organizations are truly remarkable in light of the fact that Japanese Christians, who number around one million, make up no more than one per cent of the Japanese population. Thus, compared with the new religions, some of which have millions of members, these groups are very small. According to the figures for temples, shrines, churches and new religions listed in the Japanese yearbooks on religion, there are around 180,000 religious corporations in post-war Japan.⁶⁸

In all, though, despite the increasing number of new religions, religious faith declined by more than half from 1946 to 1950. Between 1970 and 1980 it diminished further to 30 per cent of the population. The shock incurred by the 1994 gas attack on the underground rail system by the Aum sect, in which 27 people were killed, led to a further decline in religious faith to 20 per cent. Nonetheless, during the period when the number of believers stood at around 30 per cent, the number of those taking part in religious rituals was double that of believers, according to national surveys. And even when the numbers of believers fell further in the 1970s, there was no discernible decrease in the numbers of those taking part in the rituals. In 2005, the number of those visiting temples and shrines during the three-day new year festival even climbed somewhat (770,000 more than in the previous year) to a total of 89,660,000. It is true,

He mentions three additional characteristics: they are centred on a place of pilgrimage, emphasize the unity of religion and life, and endow their members with a sense of importance and dignity.

⁶⁸ See Helen Hardacre, 'Religion and Civil Society in Contemporary Japan', *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies*, 31.2 (2004), pp. 389–415, here pp. 400–401.

as Peter Köpping has shown, that it is above all Japanese tourists who attend the village festivals, which have acquired a quite new 'staged' character in the broken-up village community of today,⁶⁹ but this does not straightforwardly clarify the relationship between these new productions and the old with respect to their religiosity. For to measure the adherents of a religion according to their belief rather than their participation in rituals conforms to a typical Christian-European perspective, which has taken hold in Japan only under the influence of Christianity. In this sense, the category of a-religious or non-religious Japanese has existed only since the category of religious faith became established within internal Japanese discourse. Thus, secularization as measured through Western religious statistics is spreading in the shape of a Western religious discourse within Japan, and not necessarily in the form of changes in Japanese religious practices.⁷⁰

It is no easy task to determine religious affiliation among the Japanese. It is frequently stated that, because of multiple answers, questionnaires indicate that far more than 100 per cent of Japanese are affiliated to a religion. There are estimates suggesting that around 50 per cent of all Japanese can still be described as Buddhists, while other sources state that only 30 per cent of Japanese have any religious ties at all, most of them to new religious movements. In a 1976 article on secularization in Japan, Jan Swyngedouw proposed that, in light of the many coexisting religions in Japan, we should regard the 'religion of Japanese-ness' as the entity vis-à-vis which something akin to secularization is taking place.⁷¹ Max Eger has an even more critical take on application of the theory of secularization to Japan. As he sees it, secularization occurred in Japan earlier than in Europe and independently of modernity. In sharp contrast to Europe, according to Eger, with the host of new religions, modernity in Japan has in fact brought about a resacralization of the country.⁷²

⁶⁹ See Peter Köpping, 'Die Umkehrung des Blicks: Zur Akkomodierung von Inauthentischem in festlichen Inszenierungen in Japan und Indien', in Erika Fischer-Lichte and Isabel Pflug (eds.), *Inszenierung von Authentizität*, Tübingen, 2000, pp. 1–23.

⁷⁰ See Satsuki Kawano, *Ritual Practice in Modern Japan*, Honolulu, 2005, p. 13.

⁷¹ See Jan Swyngedouw, 'Secularization in a Japanese Context', *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies*, 3.4 (1976), pp. 283–306, here pp. 294, 297. On the theory of secularization in Japan, see also idem, 'Reflections on the Secularization Thesis in the Sociology of Religion in Japan', *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies*, 6.1–2 (1979), pp. 65–88. See also the following article by Tamaru Noriyoshi on pp. 89–114, 'The Problem of Secularization: A Preliminary Analysis'.

⁷² See Max Eger, "Modernization" and "Secularization" in Japan: A Polemical Essay', *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies*, 7.1 (1980), pp. 7–24.

Korea

As in China and Japan, Korea's religious history also features two cultural encounters that have exercised a lasting effect on the country's religious landscape: the encounter with Buddhism in the fourth century and that with Christianity in the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries. Only so-called shamanism, whose origins are unknown, can be described as an indigenous Korean religion.⁷³ However, Buddhism, Confucianism, Christianity and a new Korean religion, Ch'ondogyo ('doctrine of the heavenly way'), founded in the nineteenth century, can be described historically. In different phases of Korean history, different religions had a particularly close relationship with the ruling court and were promoted and given preferential treatment: Buddhism came to Korea in the fourth century and had the status of state religion during the Shilla and Koryo kingdoms (from 668 to 1392).⁷⁴ Under the Yi dynasty (from 1392 to 1910), when it was the turn of Confucianism to function as state religion,⁷⁵ Buddhism, which had by then become politicized and secularized, was subject to significant restrictions.⁷⁶ Temples to Confucius were erected, and society was organized according to Confucian hierarchies, headed by scholar-officials and soldiers with a Confucianist education, with butchers, shamans and Buddhist monks making up the lower end of the spectrum. All religious groups stood in a state of powerless opposition to state Confucianism.⁷⁷ Some of them engaged in political resistance and were consequently persecuted to a greater or lesser extent – the former applying to the Christian communities founded in the late eighteenth and the early nineteenth century.

⁷³ See Cho Hung-Youn, *Koreanischer Schamanismus: Eine Einführung*, Hamburg, 1982. See also Kang Wi Jo, 'Indigenous Tradition of Korean Religions', *Shinhak nondan*, 14 (1980), pp. 189–219; and Kim Chol-choon, 'Native Beliefs in Ancient Korea', *Korea Journal*, 3.5 (1963), pp. 4–8.

⁷⁴ See Lewis R. Lancaster, Kikun Suh and Chai-shin Yu (eds.), *Buddhism in Koryo: A Royal Religion*, Berkeley, Center for Korean Studies, Institute of East Asian Studies, University of California, 1996.

⁷⁵ See Key P. Yang and Gregory Henderson, 'An Outline of Korean Confucianism', *Journal of Asian Studies*, 18 (1958), pp. 81–99, 259–76.

⁷⁶ See Keel Hee-Sung, 'Buddhism and Political Power in Korean History', *The Journal of The International Association of Buddhist Studies*, 1 (1978), pp. 9–24. On Buddhist survival strategies, see Robert E. Buswell, Jr, 'Buddhism under Confucian Domination: The Synthetic Vision of Sosan Hyujong', in JaHyun Kim Haboush and Martina Deuchler (eds.), *Culture and the State in Late Chosôn Korea*, Cambridge, 1999, pp. 134–59.

⁷⁷ See Boudewijn Walraven, 'Popular Religion in a Confucianized Society', in Haboush and Deuchler (eds.), *Culture and the State in Late Chosôn Korea*, pp. 160–98.

In 1895 Japan invaded Korea, annexed it fully in 1910 and governed it as a colony until 1945. The Confucianist system was abolished, Western teachings were introduced and Christian missionaries were allowed to carry out their work. As a consequence of the modernization forced upon the country by the Japanese invasion, a large number of new religions emerged between 1890 and 1910 as protest movements against penetration by things Western,⁷⁸ whose political dominance led to a politicization and secularization of the religious field.⁷⁹ In opposition to the powerful new Western influences, a new liberation movement developed in the second half of the nineteenth century, which initially took the name 'Eastern Teaching' (*Tonghak*), thus defining itself as the opposite of 'Western teaching', which meant Catholicism. This Eastern Teaching united Confucian, Buddhist, shamanistic and – despite its xenophobic and anti-Christian stance – Christian-humanist elements, making this a typical example of a neo-religious national doctrine. In response to the increasing influence of the revolutionary Tonghak ideology, the movement's founder, Choe Che-U (1824–64), was executed in 1864 along with 20 of his followers. The movement, however, lived on, and formed the underpinnings of a series of peasants' revolts, of which the uprising of 1894 led to full-blown civil war, which was ultimately put down with the aid of Japanese troops. In 1906, the movement was re-formed under the new name of Ch'ondogyo, again played a key role in the movement opposing the Japanese occupation in 1919, but then lost significance before coming to life again in the Christian Minjung theology of the 1970s and 1980s. Significantly, both the early political leaders of South Korea and their contemporary counterparts, many cabinet members, most members of the Liberal Party and around a quarter of the present-day National Assembly belong to this Christian community. Hence, Christianity has been granted political privileges since the end of the Korean war in 1953, in part because it is intended to function as a bulwark against communist North Korea.

In parallel to this, the Korean economy underwent a profound transformation from the 1960s on, turning from a traditional agrarian economy into an industrial one and prompting a major urbanization of society, a society now concentrated around a small number of cities. This period saw the emergence of charismatic churches with huge numbers of followers, churches bearing the unmistakable hallmarks of traditional shamanism.⁸⁰ At the same time, the Christian churches

⁷⁸ See Kil-myung, 'New Religions and Social Change'.

⁷⁹ See Kang Wi Jo, 'The Secularization of Korean Buddhism under the Japanese Colonialism', *Korea Journal*, 19.7 (1979), pp. 42–47.

⁸⁰ See Hong Young-gi, 'The Background and Characteristics of the Charismatic Mega-Churches in Korea', *Asian Journal of Pentecostal Studies*, 3.1 (2000), pp. 99–118, here p. 108.

increasingly cooperated with European churches, prompting them to oppose the authoritarian leadership style of General Park Chung-hee, who came to power as a result of a putsch in 1960, and to work towards a democratic, humane, open society. It was, therefore, often priests who led the nationwide pro-democracy movements. However, church activities and institutions were banned by the regime towards the end of the 1960s. In 1972 a constitutional amendment effectively abolished the separation of powers and allowed Park to govern as a dictator. The Christian groupings responded in a variety of ways, ranging from cooperation to vehement opposition, and in line with this, Park dealt with them in differing ways, through cooptation, exclusion and persecution. After Park's murder at the hands of the head of the secret service and another putsch, students carried out mass demonstrations, culminating in 1980 with a massacre and a wave of arrests. The opposition movement that developed out of this united old popular religious traditions, Buddhism and Ch'ondogyo into a messianic-political movement called Minjung (oppressed, suffering people). The Korean Christians took up this idea and created out of it a Minjung theology that brought together messianic elements of the Korean religions combined with the Christian theology of suffering to make a Koreanized Christian theology; its simplistic radicalism helped make it hugely successful as a political opposition, and it played an important role in changing Korean society.⁸¹ In 1987, after further student unrest on a massive scale, a new constitution was adopted, in which the separation of powers was reinstated.

The opposition movement, strongly motivated by Christian impulses, played a key role in this transition to democracy, a role which it subsequently lost. This plunged the churches into a crisis, amplified by the fact that the economic situation had by now improved so much that – even within Christian circles – an increased interest in personal advancement pushed interest in religion into the background.⁸² The religious institutions of Korea responded in very different ways. Some Christian groups, with their radical theological vision of a heavenly kingdom, remained outside political structures in the fundamentalist opposition, while others focused their attention on the bourgeoisie emerging in the new Korean democracy, formed parties and got involved in politics and in thousands of civil society organizations; these emerged in the 1990s and saw themselves as a kind of 'third power' between state and capital that wished, as critical observers, to open up a public debate on socio-political topics (environment,

⁸¹ See Lee Sang Taek, *Religion and Social Formation in Korea: Minjung and Millenarianism*, Berlin, 1996; and Ryu Tongshik, 'Religion and Socio-Cultural Transformation in Korea Today', *Asian Cultural Studies*, 12 (1981), pp. 61–72.

⁸² See Park Yong-Shin, 'Protestant Christianity and its Place in a Changing Korea', *Social Compass*, 47.4 (2000), pp. 507–24, here pp. 519–20.

transport policy, industrial law, women, historical guilt, political division) in the interests of the common good.⁸³ The churches too took up these subjects as well as building worldwide networks through the World Council of Churches. In the Buddhist sphere, a Minjung Buddhism drawing on Minjung theology developed in the 1980s in the wake of an intellectual movement inspired by liberation theology. This began in the 1960s with the aim of reviving Buddhist consciousness, in the sense of Mahayana Bodhisattva compassion, in order to alleviate suffering and achieve liberation. On the one hand, this Minjung Buddhism opposed the two great conservative movements of the patriotic communities (of monks and lay people), which, with their nationalist demands, it accused of wishing only to retain power and estates and thus of pursuing a purely secular agenda. On the other hand, it opposed the fusion of popular Buddhist practices of Amitabha veneration and traditional shamanistic rites, practised mainly by women, which supposedly ensured a long life and worldly wellbeing. Again, it objected to these practices on the grounds that they were concerned solely with secular goals.⁸⁴ Thus, in twentieth-century Korea, Buddhism too incorporated the impulse against secularization that formed the basis for the development of new religious movements.

In much the same way as in Japan, with respect to society and politics as well as in their relations with each other, religions in Korea occupy a field of tension involving very different endeavours. First, they advocate traditional-conservative stances, on the basis of which they often attempt to serve politics in a nationalistic fashion. Second, they involve themselves in the political opposition which, in sharp contrast, conceives of religion as fundamentally opposed to politics. Furthermore, religious groups engage in civil society in an active attempt to introduce their religious ideals to society. Finally, new religions emerge. Within the unlimited field of global multicultural impulses, these religions attempt to forge new, coherent religious identities from the rubble of their own fragmented tradition.

Practically nothing is known about the religious situation in the north of Korea. According to the Christian missionaries best informed about it, there is theoretical freedom of religion but, in the shape of the ephemeral state-controlled

⁸³ See Christine Lienemann-Perrin, 'Religion und staatliche Macht in Korea: Eine Skizze mit Beispielen aus Geschichte und Gegenwart', in Peter Schalk (ed.), *Zwischen Säkularismus und Hierokratie: Studien zum Verhältnis von Religion und Staat in Süd- und Ostasien*, Uppsala, 2001, pp. 143–67, here p. 163.

⁸⁴ See Shim Jae-ryong, 'Buddhism and the Modernization Process in Korea', *Social Compass* 47.4 (2000), pp. 541–48, here pp. 542–43. See also Henrik H. Sorensen, 'Buddhism and Secular Power in Twentieth-Century Korea', in Ian Harris (ed.), *Buddhism and Politics in Twentieth-Century Asia*, London, 1999, pp. 127–52.

North Korean Christians' Association, all that exists in reality is an ersatz church with three churches in Pyongyang, to which only carefully selected members are sent. As in China, the religious communities are organized in state-controlled organs. Since 1946, Protestants have been brought together in the Korean Christian Federation (KCF), Catholics, since 1988, in the Korean Catholic Federation, and other members of religious groups, since 1989, in the Korean Religionists' Council. According to estimates, around 10,000–12,000 of the 24 million North Koreans are Christians, compared with up to 18 million out of 44 million in South Korea, that is, rather more than 40 per cent. According to official figures, there are 10,000 Buddhists in North Korea, and there is universal religious freedom. However, as the communist ideology of North Korea is atheistic, despite the god-like status of its political leader and the quasi-religious personality cult that surrounds him, we must assume that religions are strictly controlled and probably subject to extensive repression, even after the 1992 removal of the clause in the constitution explicitly prohibiting religious activities.

Following this rough sketch, I shall conclude by drawing some conclusions about secularization in East Asia.

Conclusion

Taken together, East Asian religions appear Janus-faced: the servants and allies of the state on the one hand and its opponents and enemies on the other. In all three countries, a limited number of specific religious traditions have been permitted by the state; these have been used to further the state's secular goals and have, at different times, been favoured or repressed. In this connection, it is possible to discern the secularization of religious traditions in East Asia long before the dawn of the modern age. Further, all three countries – and here their traditions differ from the Christian traditions of Europe – have absorbed and integrated several foreign religions over the course of the last two thousand years. Consonant with this, through the encounter with Europe, all three have developed numerous new religious movements that closely resemble one another in their basic features (syncretism, charismatic leaders, simple dogma, millenarian focus on salvation, etc.). As a result, in all three countries the old religious traditions have also changed greatly and, in light of the Christian-Western concept of religion, have often renewed themselves behind the shield of secular concepts, which suggests continuities with East Asian forms of religion and Western processes of secularization. Finally, very much in keeping with contemporary global developments, all three currently feature an extremely wide range of religious diversity and their religions currently enjoy broad appeal.

The question of whether secularization has occurred in the individual East Asian countries always demands a dual answer, one positive, the other negative.

With respect to China, we might answer, positively, as follows:

- Yes, since 1911 there has been no Son of Heaven, his rule legitimized by a heavenly mandate; the state has a secular foundation and there is a strict legal separation between religion and the state.
- Yes, the everyday religious routine has been lost in most parts of the country. Most people do not regularly take part in religious activities. It is the exception rather than the norm to be religious in China; religion has suffered a marked loss of significance.
- Yes, the concept of religion has been introduced and with it the critique of religion. As a rule, the world is explained without recourse to gods and spirits. Practically no religious socialization occurs, while perspectives critical of religion are promoted. Thus, religion does not constitute a fundamental system of reference; across most of China, it is a private matter.
- Yes, over the last hundred years, throughout the country, religious institutions have suffered acts of destruction – long since irreversible – on a massive scale. Certainly, temples have been reconstructed and ordinations performed, but even tens of thousands of temples with hundreds of thousands of clergy are a mere drop in the ocean in this context, and religious institutions have thus declined markedly as well.
- Yes, in those places where religion has a secure place, this is entirely due to the understanding that it relieves the state of order-maintaining functions at the local level, making it akin to a secular and civil society-based institution. The five officially recognized religions act in conformity with the secular expectations that the state has of them. They stand outside social life, as institutions endowed with a religious character that exist within a secular context.

One might counter:

- No, the Communist Party certainly promotes the idea that it is atheistic, but has always made use of religious concepts and images in cultivating its image. Besides, it makes theological decisions on orthodoxy and heresy, on true religion and superstition. Thus, religion and the state are not truly separate.
- No, while the everyday religious routine has vanished for the time being as a result of temporary political repression, in those places where it is developing most strongly at present, in the southeast of

China, it is already playing an important role in public life, and is thus by no means slipping away into the private sphere.

- No, there are countless local cults, hundreds of new religious movements and the major religious traditions are growing year on year. Temples are being built everywhere, while monks and nuns are being ordained in their thousands. With increasing economic growth, the country will again be dotted with countless temples, and an intact religious landscape will again take shape over the long term.
- No, in some fields the religious infrastructure is so vital to local life and local politics and administration that it is impossible to separate the religious from the secular. The fact that the state has begun to transfer state functions even to the official religions over the last decade shows that they too have a solid political basis. Thus, religion will become increasingly important, and without it, it will no longer be possible to maintain the sociopolitical order at the local level.

With respect to Japan, we can answer positively as follows:

- Yes, on 1 January 1946 the Tenno officially renounced his divine status; the constitution states explicitly that religion and the state are separate.
- Yes, the concept of religion has been introduced and with it the critique of religion. As a rule, the world is explained without recourse to gods and spirits.
- Yes, the number of believers has declined markedly, by more than half from 1946 to 1950, down to 30 per cent between 1970 and 1980 and to 20 per cent following the gas attack on Tokyo's underground rail system by the Aum sect in 1994.
- Yes, the Buddhist temples increasingly offer rituals with a worldly orientation (concerned with prosperity, security, etc.) that no longer have anything to do with their old religious-spiritual meanings.
- Yes, Shintoism has been emptied entirely of its religious content and has been secularized into nothing more than a state cult.
- Yes, the many new religious movements are an expression of the fact that religion has disintegrated into discrete, highly individualized spheres, that primarily pursue secular goals.
- Yes, the institutionalized religions are all heavily involved in civil society; they too primarily pursue secular goals.

- Yes, the village communities have suffered such shattering transformation that more tourists than villagers now attend rural religious festivals.

On the other hand:

- No, Japan is full of temples and shrines. Both in the cities and in the countryside there are religious establishments on every corner that are actively maintained and have a full roster of events.
- No, public rituals are a common occurrence in which many people, increasing numbers in fact, participate. The everyday religious routine is largely intact; regular participation in religious events is a cultural norm and defines Japanese religiosity far more profoundly than religious faith.
- No, the new religious movements are so numerous and active that religion continues to be a key topic for many different social classes, giving it an important role in public discourse. Religion is not, therefore, a purely private, personal affair.

With respect to Korea, the positive answers are:

- Yes, the constitution codifies the separation of state and religion.
- Yes, the concept of religion has been introduced and with it the critique of religion. As a rule, the world is explained without recourse to gods and spirits.
- Yes, in the face of the overriding interest in economic development in Korea, religions are either meaningless or involve themselves in the pursuit of worldly salvation and in political and civil society-related affairs.

On the other hand:

- No, there is no indication that the religions are declining or losing importance. They are growing steadily and are a lively presence in public and social life.
- No, creative religious work is being done and there is clear evidence of internal religious debates; both lead to religious innovation.
- No, religious education is a widespread phenomenon, and active missionary work is being carried out all over the world. Religion continues to make a significant impact.

These answers reveal that the concept of secularization, with its associated

criteria, can help us see certain realities more clearly. At the same time it is apparent that, rather than describing fully the contemporary religious situation in East Asia, it can only reveal various aspects. Depending on the criteria we select, we can describe these as secular or not; they exist within a process of lively, mutual negotiation. It appears to be the specific fusion of these different aspects, a fusion subject to a process of constant transformation, that ultimately distinguishes these religious cultures from one another.